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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000342

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [CB](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAMESE MONKS PROTEST SITUATION IN SOUTHERN  
VIETNAM

¶1. (SBU) Summary. On February 27, approximately 40 Buddhist monks -- mostly from southern Vietnam -- staged a four-hour protest demonstration near the Vietnamese Embassy to protest conditions affecting the ethnic Khmer in Vietnam; in particular, the defrocking of monks. The unapproved but peaceful demonstration took place in conjunction with the two-day visit of Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet to Cambodia. The UN Human Rights Office and LICADHO officials mediated between police and protesting monks, and were permitted to escort the monks back to their respective pagodas to avoid any arrests of the participants. The following day, one Khmer Krom monk was reported to have committed suicide; NGOs are investigating the death. On March 1, the MOI notified Khmer Krom organizations that they could hold a protest at a local pagoda, but authorities and pro-CPP monks have reportedly limited participation. End Summary.

Vietnamese Monks Stage Protest  
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¶2. (U) On the morning of February 27, approximately 40 Buddhist monks participated in a peaceful protest near the Vietnamese Embassy in Phnom Penh regarding the defrocking of 13 Vietnamese monks who allegedly participated in demonstrations by ethnic Khmer in southern Vietnam over human rights issues. The protest took place during the two-day visit of Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet. The four-hour protest by the Buddhist monks (who have rarely participated in peaceful demonstrations in recent years in Cambodia) was eventually dispersed by local police joined by members of the armed riot police unit. Although the police initially showed unusual tolerance in allowing the protesters to group near the Vietnamese Embassy, the security forces' patience began to wear thin by mid-morning, with the police threatening to arrest or detain any monk who did not leave. At one point, police reportedly tried to force the monks onto buses to take them out of the area. The monks refused, believing that they would be arrested if they left under police supervision. Alerted to the possibility of a confrontation between the monks and the police, the UN's Human Rights Office and LICADHO dispatched staff members to calm the situation. The UN and NGO members were able to receive police agreement for the peaceful removal of the monks in NGO vehicles. LICADHO, joined by ADHOC and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), later issued a joint press statement criticizing the police for their reaction to the peaceful demonstration, as well as for the detention of a private citizen who allegedly questioned the police for their treatment of the monks.

One Monk Dies Later: Police Claim Suicide  
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13. (U) The UN Human Rights Office notified the Embassy on March 1 that one of the monks who may/may have participated in the demonstration committed suicide at the pagoda where he was staying. Media reports on March 2 note that NGOs are investigating the circumstances surrounding the death. The monk, Eang Sok Thoeun, age 32, came to Cambodia recently with other Vietnamese monks from southern Vietnam. Police have ruled the cause of death as a suicide, claiming that the young monk slit his own throat and noting that there were unspecified drugs found in the young man's possession.

14. (U) The Khmer Kampuchea Krom human Rights Organization (KKKHRO), however, disputed the police analysis. One of the organization's investigators noted that the monk's room had two doors, and it would have been easy for someone from outside the pagoda to enter the room. In addition, the investigator thought it suspicious that the police buried the body the same night, at around 0200 in the morning. Witnesses reportedly said that the victim's throat wound was very large, and inconsistent with the type of cut that one could easily administer oneself. Human rights NGOs have also expressed reservations about the police conclusions and are reportedly attempting to exhume the body for a more detailed medical examination.

Khmer Krom Organizations to Meet, Demonstrate on March 2  
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15. (U) Several of Cambodia's Khmer Kampuchea Krom organizations had petitioned the Ministry of Interior to hold demonstrations in conjunction with the Vietnamese President's visit. Police officials, however, reportedly told the groups that if they wanted to organize rallies, any demonstrations

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should be staged in pagodas. The MOI announced on March 1 that organizations could hold a one-hour meeting on March 2 at a pagoda in Phnom Penh's Stung Meanchey district. Organizers intended to continue their protests over reports of the Vietnamese government's defrocking of 13 monks in southern Vietnam. One local Khmer Krom organization told the press that they plan to send a petition to the United Nations calling for an intervention in southern Vietnam.

16. (U) In a public statement regarding the visit to Cambodia by Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet, the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), which has promoted Khmer Krom causes in the past, urged the Cambodian government to press Vietnam to respect religious freedom, particularly with respect to Khmer Krom monks, end human rights abuses against all ethnic minorities, including the Montagnards and the Khmer Krom, engage with Cambodian villagers along the border with Vietnam about concessions of border lands, and to rectify water disputes and livelihood issues in Ratanakiri in northeastern Cambodia. SRP officials note that the RGC likely allowed the March 2 demonstration and rally to proceed as the Vietnamese President had left the country.

Embassy Meeting with Khmer Kampuchea Krom HR Organization  
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17. (SBU) On March 2, Emboffs met with Ang Chanrith, Director of the Khmer Kampuchea Krom Human Rights Organization (KKKHRO), as well as Thatch Prey Cheakoeun, one of the Vietnamese monks who participated in the demonstration on February 27 and who had earlier fled to Cambodia in 2005. They discussed the demonstration and the problems facing the Khmer Krom in Cambodia and Vietnam. The monk noted that he and 15 other Vietnamese monks came to Cambodia following the February 2005 arrest of a fellow monk in Vietnam. Originally, he and the others in his group received persons of concern status from UNHCR, but he claims that status was later lifted and he has been in legal limbo ever since. The demonstration on February 27 was in response to the latest Vietnamese government crackdown on over 200 monks on February

8, 2007, which allegedly took place in one of the southern provinces of Vietnam in front of the provincial authority's offices. The Vietnamese authorities reportedly arrested 13 monks and de-frocked them, after which other monks involved in the protest fled to Cambodia.

18. (SBU) The Vietnamese monk said that in Vietnam, the ethnic Khmer monks have been taking the lead on advocating for religious freedom, land rights and other human rights related to preserving Khmer culture. As a result, the monks have borne the brunt of Vietnamese authorities' ire, but Ang Chanrith claims that more than 30,000 Vietnamese Khmer Krom have entered Cambodia, particularly Takeo province, over the past several years to escape Vietnamese oppression. Ang Chanrith (please protect) noted that the Cambodian National Police allegedly issued a directive in late 2006 to Cambodian border authorities and warned them to reject any Khmer Krom who attempted to enter Cambodia from Vietnam. Chanrith claims that he received a copy of the directive from a sympathetic member of the border police, and that other members of the Ministry of Interior friendly to his organization have confirmed the document. His main concern at the moment is the status of Vietnamese Khmer Krom in Cambodia, as Chanrith suspects the RGC plans to deport many of them to Vietnam at the behest of the Vietnamese government. He has alerted the UN Human Rights Office and UNHCR regarding his concerns, and urged both organizations to intervene with appropriate RGC authorities.

Comment  
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19. (SBU) We understand the pagoda demonstration scheduled for today attracted approximately 100 monks, a far lower number than expected, according to Ang Chanrith. Chanrith told us that police had surrounded the pagoda earlier in the day to discourage monks from entering, and other head monks in pagodas around Phnom Penh reportedly had directed monks in their establishments to refrain from attending. We note that there are a number of Khmer Krom organizations in Cambodia, and the KKKHRO is considered by the UN Human Rights office as one of the most credible. Post has not yet had sufficient time to compare notes with the NGO community nor relevant UN offices concerning the information contained in this report, but will follow up with interlocutors and report separately. We also understand that Khmer Krom communities in Australia and the United States may be planning similar demonstrations

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in support of the Vietnamese Khmer Krom monks. End Comment.  
CAMPBELL